

Individualism: Quest for Self-Actualization in *The Diviners*

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Abstract

The meaning of individualism has shifted over the decades in Canada. Canada was founded as a bilingual country, where individuals were supposedly strongly aligned with the principal and views of their groups and religions. Merriam Webster dictionary defines it as “A theory maintaining the political and economic independence of the individuals and stressing individual initiative action and interests also: conduct on part guided by such a theory.” According to Laurence, “To had to deprive them, but if a person does not look after herself in this world. No one else is likely to” (*The Stone Angel*, 173). Women were not permitted much individualism of any kind. Their economic and social roles were preset. They were not to express their views. They could not wish marriage of her own choice. They had no right regarding children. They were considered less in the matter of employment and payment. They were not open sexually. Indigenous Canadians were certainly not permitted much individualism. They were forced into reserves or back into the bush. They are not capable of being an individual in the way a male like Britishers, or French Canadians are. One of Canadian’s most accomplished writers, Margaret Laurence (1926-87) received many awards, including Canada’s prestigious Governor General’s Literary Award for *The Diviners* and *A Jest of God*. *The Diviners* (1974) was Laurence’s final novel and is considered one of the Classics in Canadian Literature. In her novel, she searches herself when she stands because this last novel is considered her autobiography. She goes through an identity crisis in her life. She explores her routes and identity where she stands. Many of the incidents in her life, her agony, and curiosity to know her routes are well expressed in this novel. In *The Diviners*, the story of writer, Morag Gunn is true in its spirit to Laurence’s own maturing, is the climate work of the Manawaka cycle. A complex and profound novel, it brings the Scottish pioneers and the metis outcasts of Manawaka together and climates is the joining of the past and

present and the affirming of the future person in the person of Pique, the daughter of Morag and Jules Tonnere.

Keyboards: Individual identity, Roots, Manawaka, Morgan Gunn, journey

A prominent figure in contemporary Canadian Literature, Laurence earned international acclaim for realistic fiction that focuses on the individual's quest for self-actualizing. *The Diviners* was nominated for Governor General Award and she gained it a second time for this novel. Her writings of the short story, children's books, and novels present the struggle between identity and self-discovery. Her Manawaka series of novels, *Manawaka*, a fictional name of her hometown Neepawa, gave her popularity. Her works include; *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *Fire Dwellers* (1969), and *The Diviners* (1979).

Margaret Laurence was born in prairie town Neepawa, Manitoba (model for the fictional Manawaka), on 18 July 1926. She was the daughter of solicitors Robert Wemyss and Verna Jean Simpson. Following the death of her mother when Laurence was four, a maternal aunt, Margaret Simpson came to take care of the family. A year later, Simpson married Robert Senior and in 1933 they had a son Robert. In 1935, Robert Wemyss Sr. died of pneumonia. In 1944 Laurence attended Winnipeg's United College on scholarship, pursuing an honors English degree. She wrote book reviews, covered labor issues, and hosted a daily radio column. Each of the Manawaka Novels may be described in one way or another as, 'a fictional autobiographies and has given unforgettable portraits of women wrestling with their demons, striving through self-examination to find meaningful patterns in their lives. Her protagonists at the beginning of novels might be victims but by the end, they refuse to become victimized. Their state of wilderness is transformed into a state of Wholeness by their journey, which is often seen as a means of escape from claustrophobia. The actual journey becomes a metaphor for the journey towards selfhood and an acceptance of their heritage. Thus, Laurence's characters hold a mirror to the lives of several generations settled in and around the town of Manitoba. As Clara Thomas puts it “. . . in their dilemmas, her characters move us through four generations of the history of this country . . . through two world wars and depression to the contemporary” (Thomas, 1970). It is the last novel in the series of

Manawaka fiction. It has been acclaimed by many critics as the most outstanding achievement in her writing career.

It is about Morag Gunn, who is born in the small town of Manitoba. She loses her parents at a very young age. Later she is brought up by the town scavenger and his dim wife. She goes to University in Winnipeg vowing to escape the life she has grown up in. There she marries her professor and becomes a writer. When her husband refuses to let her become a mother and does not encourage her in writing, she leaves her husband. Then she meets her childhood friend and gives birth to a baby. She raises the baby on her own in Vancouver, London, and McConnell's landing. She feels lonely and starts searching for her roots when she has come from. In the end, she finds the truth that her roots are nowhere but in the same place where she was brought up. This powerful and fascinating story of the struggles of an independent woman and the search for her roots is told through an extended flashback, snapshots, and inner monologue.

The novel is divided into five Sections— "River of Now and Then", "The Nuisance Grounds", "Halls of Sign", "Rites of Passage" and "The Diviners" - which move generally forward from an early summer morning to an early autumn evening. "River Now and Then" and "The Diviners" join each other to encircle the three intervening sections of the book.

The section "The Nuisance Grounds" relates Morgan Gunn's childhood in Manawaka with Christie and Prin. The section title refers to Manawaka dumping Grounds where Christie the town Scavenger, dumped the collective trash. Christie and Prin Logan were Morag's foster parents as her parents died of polio when she was very young. Morag had come from a comfortable upper-middle-class family, but now she lives with a poor family. They loved and raised her and never let her feel the loss of her parents. But their poverty and uneducated background reflected in townspeople's behavior with them, gradually lead her also treat them with contempt, looking down upon them as she grows up and realized it. The following lines are very remarkable in this context, "The river flowed both ways. The current moved from north to south, but the wind usually came from the south, rippling the bronze-green water in the opposite direction. This is apparently impossible contradiction" (p.3).

The rise is a motif that runs through the novel. These beginning lines of "River Now and Then" represent Morag's life which blows North as well south. The fact that it flows not but is subjected to a wind that also sends it southward represents. The idea that we have choices in life. Life can flow toward the past or the future. It often flows in contradictory

directions rather than in straightforward ways. Morag's life flows backward to search for her roots, identity, and her existence. The very first section opening lines sum up the whole journey of the protagonist's life toward her identity.

In "Halls of Sion", Morag ostensibly escapes from Manawaka and her parents only to search for her roots. In her search, she meets Brooke Skeleton who feels that Morag is more interesting because she appears to have no past and is, therefore new and fresh. The climax of chapter III comes as Morag realizes that she is unable to live in a timeless, static world that Brooke prefers a world that rejects the past and denies the future in the shape of a child. She leaves Brooke and finds the Jules Tonnere, thereby establishing and continuity between her past in Manawaka, her present life, and her future. When she lives Jules to go further west, she carries the child she has longed for.

In "Rites of Passage", Morag has disassembled her life to the bare essentials and set forth on the search for the truth about life in Vancouver, London, Scotland, Manawaka, and McConnell's landing that brings her home. The result of escape which begins at the end of "The Nuisance Grounds" becomes a journey as she finds that she no longer needs to see Sutherland. The climax of this part and the book is the scene at Christie's funeral. The novel does not end at Christie's grave, however part first horror part first and fifth consists of the fictional present of the book.

In the end, Morag realizes that she like Royal and a neighbor who makes his living by divining walls for the farmers in the surrounding country will pass on the gift of divining to another, no doubt her daughter Pique that story Christie told to her, she has also told that story to Pique and Pique has begun to full these stories to others. Margaret Laurence is an interview with Michael Fabre, observe, "I feel that life and the world can be pretty gloomy and that people can certainly be hard and cruel to each other but I and convinced that gloom is not doom. There is hope and most people there is faith a belief in the possibility of change that will come out" (Fabre, 1984.70).

Morag strongly believed that she is inherited a fast worth being proud of and that her ancestors were rich and well-respected even in Canada. It's only much later in her life. Morag realized that Christie possessed a natural talent of storyteller and the tales he told her about her ancestors were made up stories wrapped in fact and fiction made up from the story of the real historical figure Archie MacDonald. The other aspect of Morag's feelings of rootlessness springs from her search for her individual identity as a woman. Her hometown Manitoba

would not allow her an individual identity as the unprogressive town was stuck somewhere in time in the quagmire of gender class religious and social rigidities. So, Morag headed east from her hometown first to Winnipeg, then to Toronto, and finally reached Vancouver. This journey has been a learning experience for her but it also added to her loneliness, rootlessness, and longing to be in her hometown. It may be called a full circle in the process of individual identity since she realized after wandering to so many places, that her true home was Manawaka where Christie and Prin had raised her. She visited Manawaka and feels heartbroken finding Christie was dying alone. It is at this moment that she confesses to him that he and Prin had been her parents and that she loved them.

Morag Gunn's character is the best example of rootlessness and self-actualization among Manawaka series fiction women characters. The narratives portray her life as a series of endless adventures and constant transitions from one phase to another. As an individual, Morag is different from other Manawaka series women protagonists since she had turned the full cycle taking the one desired step forward. None of the protagonists in the other novels could take a daring step, through with the burning desire to do so, to break free from their grinding religious patriarchal Milieu and sustain their lives on their terms. Again and again, she is forced to test her strength against the world and finally achieves the life she has determined that would be hers. In the word of Sara Maitland, "The culmination and completion of Margaret Laurence's celebrated Manawaka cycle, *The Diviners* is an epic novel" (Maitland, 1988).

As regards the freedom of self-expression, it can be believed that Morag leaves Manawaka as she realized Manawaka a microcosm colony with strong racial and patriarchal sentiments, would deny her the opportunity to realize her individual potentials, denying her self-expression in any form. Morag also encourages her daughter to seek her own identity and not surprisingly, the cause of action taken by Pique is the same was followed by Morag in her youth.

It can be concluded this narrative trope of Laurence that the hints of the author at a perpetual struggle generation after generation to be carried forward by women for their identity formation communicative agency and to fight their alienation and rootlessness. This struggle is beyond the boundaries of class reading and race. Morag did is as a white woman while her daughter will do the same as a Metis woman.

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